

Congressman Mike Pence questioned both Defense Secretary Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mullen during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on Afghanistan policy:

Transcript:

Rep. Pence: Thank you Mr. Chairman and I welcome this distinguished panel; I thank you all for your service to the United States and I greet you with respect.

Specifically, I have a question I want to direct first to Secretary Gates and then to Admiral Mullen having to do with some military aspects and issues arising out of the President's address last night.

First, let me say - like many have said before - that I welcome the President's call for reinforcements; I appreciate the President's embrace of the same surge strategy that worked in Iraq. Despite the fact that as a candidate the President opposed it and every Democrat on this committee opposed it, the surge worked. And as a point of clarification to Secretary Gates, you said this was your "second surge," I think that's an affirmation of that assertion I made.

But I want to specifically talk about this issue of timetables for withdrawal and get your reaction. You made mention earlier that the Bush Administration did embrace a timetable for withdrawal-of course that was after the surge worked. When President Bush announced the surge in Iraq, he did not announce a timetable for withdrawal; the timetable was negotiated in the status of forces agreement following what was universally accepted to be the success of the surge.

And so my question is really about this business of timetables, because my Democrat colleagues made more than a dozen efforts in 2007 and 2008 to impose specific timetables for withdrawal on our efforts in Iraq, fortunately unsuccessfully. And the President made reference to July of 2011. Secretary Gates you said in April of 2007 with regard to Iraq, "I've been pretty clear that I think the enactment of specific deadlines would be a bad mistake." In September of this year, you told *CNN*, "I think that the notion of timelines and exit strategies and so on,

frankly, I think would all be a strategic mistake."

I'm someone who believes it never makes sense to tell the enemy when you're going to quit fighting in a war.

Mr. Secretary, I wonder if you might elaborate-and then I have a quick question for the Admiral-on what's changed in your view here. What am I missing that distinguishes your opposition to timelines in Iraq, your opposition to a timeline you expressed here in September with regard to Afghanistan, to the President's annunciation of July 2011?

Secretary Gates: First of all, there may not have been a specific timeline associated with the announcement of the surge in Iraq, but it was quite clear that domestically it could not be sustained indefinitely. And the reality is the surge in Iraq lasted 14 months. The President is talking about at least 18 to 24 months with this surge.

First of all, I have adamantly opposed deadlines; I opposed them in Iraq and I opposed deadlines in Afghanistan. But what the President has announced is the beginning of a process, not the end of a process; and it is clear that this will be a gradual process and-as he said last night-based on conditions on the ground. So there is no deadline for the withdrawal of American forces in Afghanistan...

Pence: ...Reclaiming my time - and Secretary Gates forgive me for the constraints of our time here - your line to *CNN* was that you opposed "timelines and exit strategies," but I'll leave that there and I'll accept your response.

Admiral Mullen, last night the President said in his speech: "Commanders in Afghanistan

repeatedly asked for support to deal with the reemergence of the Taliban but these reinforcements did not arrive."The Secretary's predecessor Donald Rumsfeld this afternoon called that a "bald misstatement" and former Secretary Rumsfeld said he was "not aware of a single request."

Admiral, are you aware of a request for reinforcements from 2001 to 2008 that was not heeded? Can you tell the committee who made those requests? Can you tell the committee who in the chain of command denied those requests? Because I find the President's assertion-having been a part of the very strong bipartisan support for Afghanistan-really astonishing.

Admiral Mullen: Just in my tenure here, sir, General McKiernan specifically had a fairly substantial request for upwards of 20,000 forces which we couldn't meet because they just weren't there; they were in Iraq. I spoke out very early that Afghanistan had been under-resourced and that from where I lived, the heart of it was under-resourced with military forces. We didn't have them because they were pushed to Iraq and we really didn't have the flexibility to move them. That was a priority of a previous President. We do what the President says and that's what we did.